

The following is a summary of a report written by Charles Bruner, with Michelle Stover Wright, Barbara Gebhard, and Susan Hibbard, and published by the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network in collaboration with the Build Initiative.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush and the nation's governors established seven national education goals. The first goal was that "all children start school ready to learn." That commitment echoed an increased understanding of the importance of the first years to lifelong learning and achievement, and an acknowledgment of societal changes that mean many parents are working when their children are young.

Many states are now moving toward developing early learning systems. This work necessarily involves multiple strategies and service components. An effective early learning system must ensure that children's health care needs are addressed, that parents can provide the nurturing and stability young children need to grow and develop, and that early care and education settings meet children's supervision and developmental needs.

What governance structure can create an early learning system and then manage that system efficiently and effectively? No single answer exists. The "right" structure will vary from state to state and even within a state for a different system-building purpose. In most instances, multiple planning and governance structures are needed to construct an early learning system at the state level, at the community level, and over time. If there is no single, clear answer, however, there are models that can be helpful and several rules of thumb to consider in developing planning and governance approaches.

What is an Early Learning System?

The first rule of thumb is that **form follows function**. One of the first steps in developing a planning and governance structure is to define the structure's functions and goals. This will help to determine the required stakeholders and their roles.

Chronologically, "early learning" covers the first years of a child's life, but often it is defined to include the prenatal period and the early elementary grades as well. The broader the age range covered, the larger the actual early learning system will need to be.

Research has identified what children need to ensure their growth and development. A child's universal early learning needs¹ include the following:

- *Health and nutrition*—adequate and nourishing food and exercise for physical and mental growth, protection against and response to disease and injury, and regular check-ups and well-child visits for early identification and response to risks.
- *Competent and confident parenting*—at least one and preferably two parent figures who provide constant and consistent nurturing, protection and stimulation, and with whom the child bonds and forms attachments.
- *Constant, stable and appropriate supervision*—continuous adult oversight and support that enable and guide the child in safely exploring the world.
- *Guidance and instruction*—help and practice in developing large and small motor skills, language, pre-literacy and numeracy concepts, cognitive development, socialization, and early identification and treatment of special developmental issues and concerns.

- *Safe and supportive communities*—safe conditions within the child’s immediate environment, including environmental and physical safety, and supporting social networks for a positive, language- and experience-rich environment.
- *Ready schools* (if the focus includes school transitions or early elementary school years)—schools which provide the learning environment and special attention that children need to grow as unique human beings.

These needs can be met in a variety of ways—and they usually are met for most children, most of the time, through nongovernmental programs, services and voluntary supports. However, there are publicly-supported programs and services that need to be in place to help meet these needs for at least some children, at some times.²

Generally, most frameworks for an early learning system, or system of systems, for young children include these specific services:

- Health and nutrition (particularly in ensuring access to health care)
- Early care and education (child care and preschool)
- Family involvement and support (family support, home visiting, parenting education)
- Early intervention (early detection and treatment of developmental delays and other special health and development issues).

A dictionary definition of a *system* is “a set of connected elements, forming a complex unit with some overall purpose, goal, or function that is achieved only through the actions and interactions of all the elements.” Under this definition, states already have a health system, a special education system, a school system and a child welfare system, but each may only partially address the early learning needs of young children. At the same time, states may have early care and education and family support programs, but these are rarely considered to be a system. They usually lack strong connections with each other, and they do not share a recognized overall goal or function.

In most states, developing an early learning system requires “system building,” which involves building a “system of systems.” Some systems that must be included already exist but need to be better coordinated or their roles need to be expanded. Their actions and interactions need to contribute to the overall goal of school readiness. Other systems need to be constructed, and must be supported and financed so they are available throughout the state, to all those who need them.

States can begin building an early learning system by concentrating on building particular aspects of a “system of systems.” Different states have chosen different approaches, with efforts often directed toward building universal preschool. Even when beginning with one element of the early learning system, however, it must be recognized how important it is that the element connect with—and relate to—other elements of a future early learning system.

Understanding the Financing and Financial Strings of Current System Components

The second important rule of thumb is **follow the money**. Before reforming or building a system, it is essential to understand the resources currently used to support that system, the authority over those resources, and the conditions imposed on their use. The amount of money invested in education and development in the early years is small in comparison to that invested in the school-age or college-age years. And most of the current funding for early learning comes from federal government and not state or school district sources.

At the federal level, the largest single source of funding is through Head Start, a program administered through a federal system instead of through the states. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which provides funding for state child care subsidy programs, represents the second large block. This is usually administered through state welfare or human services departments. The third large segment is through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, also generally administered through state welfare or human services departments. Additional federal funding comes through Even Start and Title I funds, usually administered through the public school system and state departments of education. Each of these federal funding streams has separate rules, regulations and reporting requirements.

Existing resources must become part of the early learning system. System builders need to recognize the limitations that federal and other funding requirements may place on these resources, and develop structures to ensure as much coordination as possible.

Building an Early Learning System: Planning, Implementation and Management Stages

A third important rule of thumb is that **building is done in stages**. These stages require different workers and different skills, talents and resources. Sometimes activities at all stages are going on simultaneously. Building an early learning system requires:

- A *planning or design stage*, including a design or blueprint, an estimate of resources needed, a business or marketing plan, and buy-in and support from key stakeholders.
- An *implementation stage*, including a work plan, resources to execute the work plan, a structure for decision-making and maintaining the system, and an accountability system.
- An *operational or management stage* to sustain and improve the early learning system, including a decision-making and accountability structure, measurable standards and performance expectations, a quality assurance structure, professional development and infrastructural support, and the resources to carry out these functions.

All these stages can be going on simultaneously, as different parts of the system are being developed, resulting in multiple planning and governance structures within a state. The goal should not necessarily be to establish one overarching structure, but rather to assure that the different structures are aligned and coordinated.

The Role of Governance in System Building

A fourth rule of thumb is that **governance requires consent of the governed to endure**. Each of the stages described above may require different organizational or governance structures. Most often “governance” has been used to describe organized structures that are charged with certain responsibilities by state or local government to achieve a goal that requires collaboration or integration of activities across existing organizational entities that normally have separate lines of decision-making authority.

It is possible to construct a single, unified governance structure for early learning, such as a Department of Early Learning—but this has proven difficult to do. Such a department might be able to integrate all services for early learning, but at the same time would fragment existing services that have been based on service needs rather than age, such as health, special education and child welfare. Service integration from one perspective can become service fragmentation from another.

In the long term, a governance structure should be *representative, legitimate, enduring, effective and planful, and authoritative*. Governance structures have to earn the legitimacy they need to endure and be effective through their actions, not the statutes or rules that create them. This is achieved through the vision and leadership of members of the governance structure.

States generally have started with something less expansive than a newly created, all-inclusive early learning or school readiness system. In particular, the ceding of decision-making authority from existing agencies or departments to a new governance structure has been rare. Most new governance structures have only the power to encourage collaboration and voluntary compliance. And, they are most likely to have authority first over new funding, rather than existing funding streams.

Governance and Devolution

A fourth rule of thumb is to **think globally and act locally**. Ultimately, an early learning system needs to be managed and coordinated at a very local level. Local entities such as the school district, city and county government, United Way, civic organizations, and formal and informal support systems all should be part of an integrated approach to building an early learning system.

A number of states have developed local governance structures, as well as state governance structures, to move early learning system building forward. As states develop their structures at the state level, they need to decide what structures, and what level of planning and decision-making flexibility, they want to provide at the local level. Ownership and leadership at the local or community level is necessary for the development of a strong early learning system. It is particularly critical that referrals from one to another agency or system go smoothly. It is at the local level that formal and informal networks of support — civic and faith organizations, neighborhood associations and support groups, and circles of friends and neighbors — ultimately will be connected and supported in their roles in ensuring child health, development, and safety. States must determine what parameters, training, support and oversight are necessary at the state level to ensure that the discretion provided at the community level is exercised effectively.

State Experiences to Date—Planning, Governance and Management Structures for Early Learning

A final rule of thumb is **there is no magic bullet or magic structure that substitutes for passion and leadership**. System building relies on people and relationships, and planning and governance structures need to attract people with passion and vision. At the same time, states can learn from examining planning and governance structures in other states, keeping in mind their own unique aspects that must be considered in developing their system.

Over the last decade, states have taken a variety of actions to begin to build early learning systems. Many states have funded or expanded specific early learning programs such as home visiting and family support programs, family literacy efforts, and preschool and transition to kindergarten programs. Some have established rating and reimbursement systems to improve child care quality; others have supported public education campaigns about young children’s growth and development. Some states have created broader planning efforts and specific initiatives which take a comprehensive approach to early learning.

The planning and governance structures developed by the states have included *task forces and commissions* to identify needs and develop a plan for addressing them; specific *governance bodies* to manage new early learning initiatives; *cross-agency groups* for coordinating and integrating programs and services; and *new agency or departmental structures* to bring multiple programs and services into a single decision-making body. The type of structure established in a state depends on the goals and functions of that state’s system-building work, and the stage in the state’s development of a system. It is common and consistent for states to have more than one planning and governance structure working on early childhood at the same time, provided their purposes are aligned and there is coordination among them.³

Conclusion

States have employed a variety of planning, governance and management approaches to develop early learning systems for young children. The form of governance structure must follow the intended function, and different structures may be needed as the states move from planning to implementation and management.

Each governance structure has both strengths and limitations. States can learn from each other’s experiences, especially in identifying potential challenges and opportunities. In the end, it must be recognized that planning and governance structures are made up of individuals, and the effectiveness and efficiency of governance will be impacted by the strength of their leadership and vision. State legislatures with similar organizational structures can enact very different legislation, and the political climate and culture can be as important as the governance structure in determining end results.

Experts who have studied collaborative governance structures have concluded that it requires a certain form of leadership to produce real change.⁴ Structures can provide the opportunity for new approaches, but change happens where leaders with vision and a collaborative approach carry it forward. This leadership needs to come from participants on planning and governance bodies. Leadership skills may be the most critical factor in moving an early learning agenda forward, and in constructing the planning and decision-making tables needed for ongoing evolution and development.

¹ More discussion of these universal needs is included in the full paper and other State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network publications. In addition and for very similar formulations, see: Kagan, S.L., & Rigby, E. (2003). *Policy matters: Improving the readiness of children for school: Recommendations for state policy*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy; Lombardi, J. (2002). *Creating an early learning system*. Washington, DC: The Children’s Project. Lisbeth Schorr has developed a web site that provides another formulation of the key elements to achieving school readiness. It is located at www.PathwaysToOutcomes.org.

² See the full report, and Table One in particular, for a description of these programs and services.

³ See the full report for a more detailed discussion of these governance structures and examples of specific state structures.

⁴ See, for example, Chrislip, D.D., & Larson, C.E. (1994). *Collaborative leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

The full paper is available online at www.finebynine.org or by contacting the Child and Family Policy Center at 515-280-9027.

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